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OAKLAND

Melania Trump picks Royal Oak artist for 'White House Christmas Book'

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It sounds like a Hallmark movie: Young mom and dad both get laid off, she goes online to try selling her art, it catches on with buyers — and catches on at the White House, where they need a special artist for the first family's Christmas book.

Suddenly, the young mom in suburban Detroit gets a call from Washington. Whoa: none other than Melania Trump has chosen her to illustrate this year's "White House Christmas Book," the annual picture book given away to visitors each December.

"I literally hung up the phone crying because this is a huge honor and privilege," said Jennifer Baghdoian of Royal Oak, who'd been selling art for just a year when she got the break of a lifetime.

Fast forward to this week: Baghdoian was back at the drawing table in her living room, juggling child care and family life with creating art for her paying customers — and definitely not living off a big commission from Uncle Sam. Her work for the White House was strictly voluntary, she said.

"I started in late August and I ended early November. It took hundreds of hours. But to me, it's being part of history," she said.

And paid or not, the project can't help but send her reputation soaring, said Dan Winter, owner of the Woodward Gallery, a 34-year-old retail art shop in Birmingham.

"It couldn't hurt, that's for sure," said Winter, whose shop combines contemporary art from the 1950s and '60s with Detroit-themed and sports-themed memorabilia.

"She's going to be hearing from people all over the country," he predicted.

Sure enough, that's happening. The notes of congratulations are coming via social media on the internet, the same conduit that sprung Baghdoian to success.

She said she got her start by displaying her art on social media, including the online arts-and-craft marketplace called Etsy.com. That gave her immediate exposure to a worldwide audience, including some eyes in high places. Earlier, Baghdoian spent a decade in gallery jobs and, before that, earned a degree in scientific illustration.

Her fast-track, tech-centric route to success continued to click when she got a mysterious email.

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“I got an email in July that said it was from the White House. And I actually thought it was fake, some kind of a scam, because I hadn’t applied for anything.

"But I looked up the email of the person and I decided “whitehouse.gov” looked pretty legitimate. Hey, I’m supposed to be smart. I went to U of M, OK?” she said, laughing.

Still in doubt, though, she replied by email. Then the White House called.

“They said they found me online. They had picked a certain number of artists and the first lady reviewed their portfolios and they asked her to choose the person she wanted to do the artwork for the Christmas book, and she chose me.

“I was shocked because I’m so new to this. I thought they’d choose a seasoned book illustrator. I mean, I’m just beginning.”

White House officials invited her to visit, all expenses paid. Baghdoian had to think fast, while her son Oliver, 18 months, slept upstairs and 5-year-old Benjamin attended kindergarten a block away.

“I’d never been to D.C. It's hard when you have two little kids at home, but my husband has been wonderful,” she said.

Her husband, Daniel Baghdoian, handled child care not only for her trip east but also “so I could stay up all night and get everything done for my regular clients and do this book.”

Although Baghdoian didn't get to meet Melania Trump, she got a private tour of the White House and a thorough schooling in this year's White House plans for holiday decor. She took scores of reference photos, later basing her illustrations on shots of the furniture, architecture, ornaments and even what was baking in the White House kitchen. This year's book features Baghdoian's illustration of an apple pie, shown beside the official White House recipe.

She also got to see examples of earlier Christmas books, including sample books from the Obama years.

"I do everything by hand, nothing digitally, and so my hand-drawing was the look they wanted this year. The first lady saw everything and had to approve it, I was told. She gave me a couple notes here and there, through the contacts I had. Like, 'She really loved this' or 'Can you do this?' " Baghdoian said.

Now, the paint has dried, the printing is done and the books are being handed out — although, in an irony familiar to creative types, Baghdoian has yet to receive a copy.

But one question begs an answer: Is she getting any backlash, in this politicized era of Trumpers and never-Trumpers?

In a word, hardly.

"I'm not political at all. This absolutely had nothing to do with politics or religion. My husband grew up with Christmas and I grew up with Hanukkah. So far, people have been very understanding. They think it's wonderful. People who've bought paintings throughout the year are getting in touch. They're saying, 'You go girl.' "

Baghdoian said she and her husband hope that, after the holiday rush calms in January, they can accept an invitation to a White House reception, get copies of the book and perhaps get to meet one very famous fan of her art.

Baghdoian's art is available at jennysnoodle.com.

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